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# **Regional Biopolitics**

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## **Abstract**

This paper seeks to bring ideas about biopolitics and its associated political technologies to bear on the variety of regional geographies that affect the practices of governing populations today. After outlining some of the ways in which populations and their characteristics feature as matters of governmental concern, the paper then briefly summarizes Foucault's account of biopolitics and its association with the formation of national population and nation-states. While there are good reasons why discussions of biopolitics have tended to emphasize the national scale, a full account of biopolitical practices would also attend to the complex spatialities of populations and government. Drawing on Stephen Legg's scalar account of the relationship between population, biopolitics and government the paper considers the tentative emergence of what might be termed regional biopolitics in contemporary Europe. Recent changes in workforce skills policy in the UK provide a case study to examine how a typical biopolitical concern (the skill levels of the population) relates to the rise and subsequent fall of regional governance in England.

## **Keywords**

biopolitics, labour market, population, regional governance, scale, skills

## **Introduction**

This paper seeks to re-cast the practice of regional economic governance as, in part, an exercise in biopolitical power. Following Michel Foucault (2004, 2009), biopolitical power concerns the management and regularization of populations in relation to their quantitative and qualitative characteristics. Foucault argued that the government of a population, rather than of the individual subjects within it, involves a distinctive form of power. While disciplinary power focuses on the individual body, biopolitical power focuses on the mass of the people as a collective with its own specific characteristics (growth rate, fecundity, vitality, morbidity and so on). Whereas Foucault's account of biopolitics focused primarily on the politics of national populations, the rise of regional economic governance in Europe in the late twentieth century led to growing political concern with the characteristics of populations at regional and sub-regional scales, resulting in the emergence of what might be termed 'regional biopolitics'.

Population geographers have, of course, long been interested in sub-national variations in populations such as regional and local differences in birth and death

rates and inter-regional migration patterns, and they have developed sophisticated statistical models to analyse these (eg REES and CONVEY, 1984; REES and KUPISZEWSKI, 1999). However a focus on biopolitics offers a rather different perspective in which demographic models and statistical knowledge are understood not as transparent windows onto pre-existing social realities, but more as lenses – political technologies that actively constitute and selectively shape the phenomena they portray. Statistics, models, forecasts, maps and graphs are performative as well illustrative: the selection and linking of variables, the drawing of boundaries, and the making of assumptions have the effect of bringing certain features of the world into focus (sometimes even into being) at the expense of others.

Understanding population politics as biopolitics also draws attention to the moral concerns that frequently underpin population policies. On the one hand, modern states' claims to political legitimacy are intimately linked to concern for the health, prosperity, fulfilment and happiness of their populations. On the other, state practices have historically reflected intense anxieties about the possible deterioration of the national character, the need to preserve the national culture and way of life, the implications of immigration and racial mixing, and threats to the fitness, virility, productivity and moral fibre of the population. As a result both the quantitative and qualitative attributes of the population are the focus of almost constant governmental concern. The attributes in question commonly include the size of the

population; its age profile; its nutritional status, health and fitness; its aptitude for work; its levels of education, skill and productivity; its capacity for creativity, innovation and entrepreneurialism; its ethnic, racial and religious composition; its sexual conduct; its happiness and subjective well-being; its cultural affinities; and its political restlessness. Nowadays many of these attributes are monitored and in some cases governed and managed at sub-national as well as national and occasionally supra-national spatial scales. Drawing on the work of Legg (2005, 2009), this paper will examine the biopolitics of regional economic governance using a case study of skills policy in the UK.

## **Population Politics as Biopolitics**

Foucault dates the emergence of biopolitics to the second half of the eighteenth century (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 241-2). He contrasts biopolitical power with the disciplinary form of power that had developed a century or more earlier and which formed the focus of much of his earlier research on institutional spaces such as the clinic and the prison. Disciplinary techniques were 'essentially centred on the body' and

included all devices that were used to ensure the spatial distribution of individual bodies (their separation, their alignment, their serialization, and their surveillance) and the organization, around those individuals, of a whole

field of visibility. They were also techniques that could be used to take control over bodies. Attempts were made to increase their productive force through exercise, drill, and so on. (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 242)

The new technology of power, by contrast, is not disciplinary. It does not displace disciplinary power but 'does dovetail into it' (p. 242). This 'non-disciplinary power is applied not to man-as-body but to living man, to man-as-living-being'. Thus

the new technology is addressed to a multiplicity of men, not to the extent that they are nothing more than their individual bodies, but to the extent that they form, on the contrary, a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on. (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 242-3)

For Foucault, 'this new technology of power, this biopolitics' is concerned with such issues as fertility and mortality rates, lifespan, ageing, disability and morbidity, with the health or illness of the population as whole, with epidemics, public hygiene and the effects of the environment, in both its natural and artificial guises (p. 243-5).

Foucault makes three observations about the new biopolitical form of power. Firstly, whereas disciplinary power is focused on the individual body, biopolitics is

concerned with the 'population'. In fact it is with the emergence of biopolitics that the concept of 'population' really comes into being as a political problem and object of government. Secondly, the matters of concern to biopolitics — disease, mortality etc. — 'are collective phenomena which have their economic and political effects, and [...] become pertinent only at the mass level' (p. 246). While unpredictable for individuals, at the collective level these phenomena are more constant (and thus by implication more amenable to government). Thirdly, and related to this, biopolitics uses 'forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures' and thus involves intervention at the level of generality to 'achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity' (p. 246), rather than the mechanisms associated with disciplinary power.

Foucault argues that adjusting mechanisms of power to the 'phenomena of population' required 'complex systems of coordination and centralization' which only became possible in the late eighteenth century (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 249-50). In other words, management at the level of population requires novel forms of technical expertise and it is only the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of the eighteenth century onwards that enables (and requires) such governmental innovation. As this paper will show, today new forms of political technology and new political rationalities have made possible further reconfigurations of biopolitical and disciplinary power at both national and sub-national geographical scales.

## Spatializing biopolitics

The emergence of biopolitics was thus intimately connected with the ongoing formation of the nation-state. The population that, quite literally, comes into being through the process of governmentalisation, is constituted first and foremost as a *national* population. The society that 'must be defended' (FOUCAULT, 2004) is above all a *national* society. The characteristics of the national population came to be the focus of national public concern and nation-state policy. However, it is not inevitable that the national must remain the sole unit of biopolitical accounting and increasingly geographers and others have begun to develop more fully spatialized accounts of biopolitics (for a review see SCHLOSSER, 2008).

An early exercise in regional biopolitics can be found in past debates about the racial composition of the population. In the second half of the nineteenth century racial theories were used not only to bolster assumptions of European superiority vis-à-vis the rest of the world, but also to analyse the geographical distribution of 'racial' variation within Europe. Anthropological studies such as John Beddoe's *The Races of Britain* (1885) and William Ripley's *The Races of Europe* (1900) documented in painstaking detail the supposed physiological and phenotypical variations between different groups (WINLOW, 2001, 2006). As Young notes, the Victorians were 'far more preoccupied with a complex elaboration of European racial differences and



alliances than with what they perceived to be the relatively straightforward task of distinguishing between European and non-European races' (YOUNG, 2008, p. 13). Beddoe's study was compiled over 20 years of observation conducted throughout Britain and Ireland. He devised a formula to calculate the 'index of nigrescence' for difference localities which could then be mapped (BEDDOE, 1971, p. 162-3) leading him to conclude that in some regions the English were being literally 'denigrated' as a result of the increasing population of the 'darker' working classes and Celts (YOUNG, 2008, p. 135-8).

Racism is integral to Foucault's account of biopolitics (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 254-63), albeit mainly in relation to the national scale. However, as Stephen Legg has pointed out, Foucault did have 'an ongoing, if indirect, fascination with scalar politics' and emphasised both the 'scaling-out of discipline to broader scales and the scaling-in of government onto individual conduct of conduct' (LEGG, 2009, p. 239). In an earlier discussion of 'Foucault's population geographies' Legg suggests that Foucault's work often demonstrates a 'somewhat lax attention to detail in terms of regional or national difference and periodisation' (LEGG, 2005). In a series of papers Legg (2005, 2006, 2008, 2009) has sought to build on Foucault's account to develop a more geographically sophisticated account of the relationships between population, biopolitics, government and scale. Legg's approach to scale is unusual because it eschews the conventional 'nested hierarchy' of local-urban-regional-national-

international (or variants thereof) in favour of a series of five sets of what he terms 'scalar practices'. These are subjectification, information collection and territorialisation, geopolitical imaginations, state technologies and international comparisons (LEGG, 2005, p. 145-6). They do not map onto standard geometrical scales, but rather refer to socio-technical practices through which particular scalar relations are produced. Legg then goes on to propose five cross-cutting 'analytical categories' (episteme, identities, visibility, techne and ethos) to provide 'channels through which the different elements of Foucault's work can be tied together' (LEGG, 2005, p. 149). In a sympathetic commentary Chris Philo (2005) suggests that Legg's approach is 'thoughtful and potentially useful' but also sometimes 'over-elaborate' (p. 327) in that it comprises an 'almost structuralist grid, with socio-spatial scales down one side and analytical levels along the other' (p. 331). However it is not necessary to endorse any incipient structuralism in Legg's account to recognise the value of his emphasis on the multiple and intersecting scales through which biopolitics works to constitute populations as diverse objects of government.

While Legg's own empirical work has focused particularly on the international (LEGG, 2009) and the urban (LEGG, 2006, 2008) as well as the national, his approach is not limited to any particular scale. Rather it lends itself to the analysis of many differently spatialized forms of biopolitical government and does not see scales as pre-constituted hierarchical levels. The practices of biopolitical government do not

simply 'operate at' scales that pre-exist them, but serve to constitute diverse geographies – whether scalar and otherwise – and their associated populations.

This can be seen in the changing significance of the region in contemporary Europe.

The governmentalisation of the region has been a marked feature of European integration since the 1980s for political, administrative and economic reasons (JONES and KEATING, 1995; KEATING, 1998; PAINTER, 2008a). Although there is no prospect of either the European Union or sub-national regions supplanting member states in terms of *sovereign* power, it is possible to see the emergence of specifically regional forms of *biopolitical* power in which the population concerned is a regional, rather than a national one, and the institutions and process of government may also be decentralised or devolved. Biopolitical government involves 'action at a distance' and a certain reach across geographical space. The space in question does not have to be a national territory. If, as Maurizio Lazzarato puts it, biopolitics can be 'understood as a government-population-political economy relationship' (2002, p. 102), then any spatial reconfiguration of the government-political economy relationship is likely to involve, and may even be enabled by, a spatial re-definition of the relevant population. The process of European integration has involved just such reconfigurations, with a strong emphasis on the region as the key site and driver of economic growth and development. The economic and geographical rationale for this emphasis is

contested and debates about the role of regional agglomerations, inter-regional competitiveness, regional innovation networks, learning regions, regional social capital and the rest will be very familiar to readers of *Regional Studies* (eg AMIN, 1998; HUDSON, 2002; SCOTT, 1996, 1998, 2001; STORPER, 1997). For present purposes however, the question is not so much whether the EU's political prioritisation of regions is well-founded, but how it relates to the shaping of populations and their attributes.

In Europe there is wide variation in the formal powers of sub-national territorial authorities. The European Union includes both fully federal and fully unitary states as well as states exhibiting varying degrees of regionalisation and decentralisation. A full survey of the distribution of powers among governmental levels in all the EU member states can be found in a study undertaken for the EU's Committee of the Regions by scholars at the European University Institute (EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, 2008). The EUI study demonstrates that there is no consistent Europe-wide pattern, but that regional authorities often have responsibility for the formation and/or implementation of policies in domains such as economic development, spatial planning, transport, education, vocational training, employment, culture, health, social welfare and environmental protection. Many of these policy domains are biopolitical; that is, they have as their focus the relevant population and its

attributes. Additionally, policy domains that remain the primary responsibility of nation states may nonetheless have a strong sub-national component.

The governmentalisation of the region in relation to biopolitical concerns can be understood in terms of Legg's five scalar practices, which comprise, as the reader will recall, subjectification, information collection and territorialisation, geopolitical imaginations, state technologies and international comparisons. Firstly, *subjectification* refers to

the process by which one conceives of oneself as a subject, positioned in various discourses, for instance, of gender, sexuality, age, class, physical ability, but also of citizens' responsibilities, the need to account and calculate, or the urge to reproduce or exercise. How is one encouraged to regulate behaviour? What is forbidden or discouraged? Why are these regulations necessary in the first place? How are they campaigned against? (LEGG, 2005, p. 145)

Clearly processes of subjectification work across many spatial scales. The national scale and the scale of the household are of central importance in shaping subject positions. However, there are also notable urban and regional variations. Old industrial regions are often associated with highly unequal gender relations based

around masculinist (and heterosexual) norms, as well as with high levels of class consciousness and strong traditions of class solidarity. Global city-regions, by contrast, may provide a supportive environment for the expression of sexual diversity, but exhibit new forms of class-based exclusion. Citizenship can also take specifically regional forms (PAINTER, 2008b) particularly where regional political institutions (or regionalist movements) provide a focus for the development of political identities at the regional scale. In Europe this can be seen in countries with federal constitutions (e.g. Germany), devolved legislatures (e.g. Scotland), and regionalist parties (e.g. Italy, Spain, Belgium).

Secondly, *information and territorialisation* refers to ‘the ways through which governments collect information about their territory and form spatial boundaries’ (LEGG, 2005, p. 145). The development of statistics played a central role in the emergence of biopolitics at the national scale. The collection of population information on a regional basis is an essential prerequisite for the emergence of regionalised forms of biopolitics. The European Union has invested heavily in the collection of regional statistics. Eurostat, the EU’s statistics service, was founded in 1953 to serve the European Coal and Steel Community, the precursor to the EU. The development of regional policy and the formation in 1975 of the European Regional Development Fund saw rapid growth in the need for regional statistics. A hierarchical system of territorial units was developed for statistical purposes. Known

as NUTS (*Nomenclature des Unités Territoriales Statistiques*), the system allows the standardisation of spatial statistics between countries and across policy domains. The units correspond to, or are made up of, existing administrative areas within each member state. Economic data relating to gross domestic product at the NUTS2 level, which comprises areas with a population between 800,000 and 3 million, is particularly important for the allocation of grants from the European Regional Development Fund. However, data are produced and published across fifteen domains including population, labour market, business, education, transport, health and agriculture.

Thirdly, *geopolitical imaginations* relate to the 'ways in which data are processed and presented and the effect on political spaces and identification' (LEGG, 2005, p. 145). An important factor here is the way in which the idea of the region itself has come to be associated with Europeanisation. Perry Anderson (1994) has gone so far to suggest that the idea of the region was effectively invented as part of the process of European integration (see also PAINTER, 2008a, p. 354-5). The routine publication of regional statistics and maps helps to normalise the region as an everyday part of the socio-economic landscape. Moreover, the presentation of data at the regional scale serves to emphasise the degree of socio-economic variation within member states and highlights cases where such internal differences are as great or greater than those between member states. Cartographic techniques and a cartographical

rationality thus underpin core EU policies such as the promotion of 'territorial cohesion'. According to article 174 of the Consolidated EU Treaties, 'in order to promote its overall harmonious development, the Union shall develop and pursue its actions leading to the strengthening of its economic, social and territorial cohesion. In particular, the Union shall aim at reducing disparities between the levels of development of the various regions and the backwardness of the least favoured regions'. The treaties give little clue as to the meaning of the concept of territorial cohesion, beyond the aspiration to reduce inter-regional disparities. The European Commission therefore published a Green Paper on territorial cohesion in an attempt to put some policy flesh on the bare bones of the treaty. Noting that 'the EU harbours an incredibly rich territorial diversity', the Green Paper suggests that

territorial cohesion is about ensuring the harmonious development of all these places and about making sure that their citizens are able to make the most of inherent features of these territories. As such, it is a means of transforming diversity into an asset that contributes to sustainable development of the entire EU. (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2008, p. 3)

The emphasis on endogenous regional assets ('inherent features') as the primary potential source of regional development is particularly notable here. The green paper goes on to assert that 'increasingly, competitiveness and prosperity depend on



the capacity of the people and businesses located there to make the best use of all of territorial assets' (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2008, p. 3). This focus on the 'capacity of the people' located in a particular region and their responsibility for the effective utilisation of the region's assets reveals the biopolitical logic at work here. The EU's routine production and mapping of regional statistics relating to population size, density, growth, decline, health, educational participation and attainment, employment rates thus operate to underpin the geopolitical imagination evident in the notion of territorial cohesion.

Fourthly, *state technologies* refer to 'the ways by which the state attempts to influence population patterns, whether of reproduction, health, productivity or migration' (LEGG, 2005, p. 146). Such state technologies, which may operate at a variety of scales, include land-use planning, interventions in the housing and labour markets, infrastructure provision, public health initiatives, education, advertising and statutory regulation. For example, immigration policy is generally a matter for national governments. However, the impact of migration can vary markedly between different regions in the same nation-state. Areas that have suffered from population decline and out-migration of skilled workers may benefit from new in-migrants. Places with labour shortages may also have a distinctive demand for migrant workers. Regions with major ports of entry, on the other hand, may face challenges providing adequate services for new arrivals. High levels of immigration

in particular places can lead to pressure on public services and housing markets, and to xenophobia. Italy exemplifies these contradictory pressures acutely. Anna Cento Bull (2010) shows how Italy's radical-right Lega Nord party is caught in a tension between the economic benefits of immigration to its regional power base in industrial Lombardy and its exclusionary anti-immigrant rhetoric. Such contradictory pressures help to explain why regionalist parties in Europe vary widely in their policies on immigration (HEPBURN, 2009). In the UK, the decline in Scotland's population led to calls for control over immigration policy to be transferred from the UK government in London to the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh. In England the need to manage the impact of immigration at the regional scales saw the formation of regional 'strategic migration partnerships' charged with promoting the 'integration' of migrants in the host region. The management of immigration at the urban scale may focus on the enhanced provision of services (for example language teaching or culturally sensitive public health activities), but can equally involve harsher and more disciplinary measures such as the intense policing of immigrant neighbourhoods and, in the case of immigration that is deemed illegal, detention and deportation.

Finally, Legg's fifth 'scale', *international comparisons*, refers to 'the degree to which policies vary between states', whether 'culture infuse[s] supposed objective categories and practices' and how international networks are 'used to discuss and

undermine state programmes' (LEGG, 2005, p. 146). The governmentalisation of regions in Europe has been a highly internationalised phenomenon. The notion that regions are the economic drivers of the global economy has been a central element of the process. Regions are exhorted to become internationally competitive and encouraged to benchmark themselves against international rivals. Regional economic statistics facilitate such comparisons within the EU, though increasingly the most challenging competition comes from Asia. A wider perspective is provided by the OECD's programme of territorial reviews which assess the economic performance of cities and regions in OECD member states against global comparators. International networks of regions, also provide opportunities for comparison (and collaboration). For example in 2008 the International Regions Benchmarking Consortium was established comprising ten major metropolitan regions drawn from Asia, Australia, Europe and North America. Based in Seattle and funded by Boeing and Microsoft, the consortium's aim is to enable the member regions 'to compare and learn from each other through economic and social data statistics and in-depth research into specific issues of common interest'.<sup>1</sup>

As this brief assessment suggests, the five sets of scalar practices identified by Legg reveal some of the complexities in the population-biopolitics-scale relationship. Consistent with Foucault's original formulations the national population remains a central focus for the exercise of biopolitical power, just at the individual body

continues to be subject to various forms of disciplinary power. At the same time, the European, regional and urban scales are also important and in some policy domains have become more significant over time. To examine this variable geometry of biopolitics in a little more depth, the remainder of the paper will consider the case of labour market governance, and specifically the changing spatiality of skills policy in the UK.

## **UK skills policy: the rise and fall of the region**

Regions have long been recognised as important spatial units in relation to labour. Historically, urban regions corresponded approximately in size to the typical maximum daily commuting distance associated with the available means of transport of the era. As David Harvey has shown, this has profound implications for governance and politics (HARVEY, 1985). There are strong pressures arising from urbanisation towards the localisation of labour market regulation – though in the second half of the twentieth century these were matched or exceeded in many advanced industrialised economies by the countervailing pull of national systems of collective bargaining, social protection and vocational training. In many countries those national systems have weakened markedly. The welfare state has been restructured, often in ways that emphasise local variation. At the same time, changes in production systems have enabled the emergence of new industrial districts in

some sectors, leading some commentators to identify the region as the primary scale for the organization of economic activity under conditions of globalization (eg SCOTT, 1998; STORPER, 1997). The neo-liberal economic orthodoxy of the 1980s and 1990s also asserted the benefits (for capital) of a move away from national systems of labour regulation. These tendencies may be mutually reinforcing. For example, greater sectoral specialisation at the regional level (as suggested by the new industrial districts literature) is consistent with regional divergence in the mix of workforce skills and knowledge and wage rates and structures. Indeed workforce skills have become a key component of increasingly geographically differentiated forms of labour market governance.

Although it is rarely written about in these terms, skill is intimately related to biopolitics because it is concerned with the qualities – mental and physical – of the economically active population. Foucault argues that political economy is concerned not only with the government of “natural resources, the products of labor, their circulation and the scope of commerce” but also with the “the number of inhabitants, their life span, their ability and fitness for work” (FOUCAULT, 1980). The issue of skill, which falls under ‘ability and fitness for work’, is thus a matter of pressing concern to government. Moreover, within neo-liberal ideology, a key aim of economic policy is not to manage the provision of employment directly or even to promote full employment at all, but simply to ready the labour force for

employment (or ensure that it readies itself). While governments have been long concerned with the general education of the population, skills in the traditional sense of proficiency for specific occupations were more often regarded as a matter for individuals, employers, trade unions and business associations.

Indeed, past usage tended to associate skill levels with specific occupations. Thus jobs involving manual labour were traditionally classified as skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled. 'Skilled' or craft jobs were those involving high levels of dexterity and precision, but also considerable decision-making. So-called unskilled occupations were those that required much less training or practice and which involved very limited decision-making and little, if any, autonomy. Access to craft occupations was traditionally guarded jealously by workers themselves, originally through guilds and the apprentice system and then through trade unions, which often sought to regulate qualifications and employment rights.

In due course skill came to be seen as a quality of the worker, as much as the occupation, and today, skill seems to be a much more general attribute with the result that the descriptions 'high skill' and 'low skill' are now applied not only to occupations and workers, but also to collective entities such as labour markets, workforces, populations and even to whole economies, regions or countries. Until the 1990s, the academic literature on the concept of skill was largely concerned with

manufacturing industry and with manual occupations (for a review, see VALLAS, 1990). Debates about skill were traditionally focused on the impact of technological change in the manufacturing process. By contrast, feminist writers, in particular, have argued that definitions of skill relate more to the value ascribed to particular occupations (and the people doing them) than to the actual content of jobs (e.g. MCDOWELL, 1991; PHILLIPS and TAYLOR, 1980). To date, however, there has been relatively little research on the implications for understandings of skill of recent changes in the nature of capitalism: the rise of knowledge and creative industries, the growth in low-wage service sector jobs, the seemingly permanent revolution in information technology and so on. Yet the idea of skill has changed dramatically in UK public policy. As Jonathan Payne puts it:

‘Skill’ has always been a somewhat slippery concept. In the past, however, skill seemed a much simpler matter than it does today. In the workplace at least, skill tended to be equated with the ‘hard’ technical abilities and ‘know-how’ of the skilled manufacturing worker or the analytical capacities of the scientist or technician. Being a skilled worker usually meant some control over one’s work, better pay and more secure employment. Today, ‘skill’ is altogether more baffling. There are ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ skills, skills that are ‘generic’ and ‘transferable’, interpersonal skills, customer handling skills, emotional skills, aesthetic skills; even certain forms of behaviour such as

motivation and discipline now acquire the label 'skills'. Almost everything it would seem is a skill from thinking and problem solving to the ability to smile. (PAYNE, 2004, p. 1)

As Payne notes, this diversification and generalisation of 'skill' presents policy-makers with considerable challenges. However, it is now commonplace for policy actors to make becoming a 'high-skill region' or developing a 'high-skill workforce' a core strategic goal. And in Europe it is indeed often the region that is the focus of many of these aspirations. As economic development policy has been increasingly devolved to regional authorities, the biopolitical characteristics of regional labour forces – their health, age, knowledge, innovativeness, as well as levels of skill – have become a matter of great concern to regional actors and institutions. Economic and politically powerful regions, such as the 'Four Motors' group (Lombardy, Rhône-Alpes, Baden Württemberg and Catalonia), emphasise knowledge exchange, innovation and creativity in line with the 'learning regions' model. In 1991 three of the regions in the Four Motors group established the Foundation of European Regions for Research in Education and Training.<sup>2</sup> Known by its French acronym, FREREF now comprises 17 member regions and works to promote the role of the region in lifelong learning and to facilitate interregional cooperation in the provision of training and skills development. EARLALL (European Assembly of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning) has similar objectives, and comprises 23 full



members.<sup>3</sup> The establishment and activities of these networks testifies to the role of regional government in education and skills provision in many European countries.

The UK, however, presents a more complex picture than is implied by the dominant European narrative of regionalisation. The New Labour government that came to power in 1997 introduced devolved government in Scotland, Wales and (eventually) Northern Ireland, along with an elected assembly for London. Regional development agencies and appointed regional assemblies with members drawn from local government and the private, public and voluntary sectors were established in the English regions outside London. In addition, a number of central government functions had previously been transferred to regional 'Government Offices' under the previous Conservative government. However proposals to establish elected regional assemblies in England were abandoned after the first referendum on the issue was heavily defeated in the North-east in 2004. In the wake of the failure of regional devolution in England, the emphasis increasingly shifted to the development of city-regions – functional economic areas defined by major urban labour markets. Outside London, England was left with a halfway house of administrative devolution and a regional tier of unelected governmental agencies with responsibility for planning, economic development and the coordination and delivery of a range of social, economic and environmental programmes. As a result of these changes, the policy landscapes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

diverged from that in England. The three devolved administrations were given responsibility for education, training and skills in their jurisdictions, while the UK government retained responsibility for these policies in the case of England. Within England the New Labour government adopted a multiscalar approach to skills policy. A national policy framework was developed with centrally mandated targets, while the regional agencies were charged with identifying regional skills priorities and developing regional skills strategies. However, following the 2010 General Election the new Conservative-led Coalition government lost no time in dismantling the architecture of Regional Development Agencies and regional Government Offices in England. Regions were dismissed as ‘artificial’ entities that did not reflect ‘natural economic areas’ (HM GOVERNMENT, 2010, p. 8 & 12). In their place has come an emphasis on functional city-regions and localism. Work on the regional skills strategies was halted in England, though the skills strategies developed for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland remain in place.

The New Labour government’s approach to skills requirements was shaped by the Leitch review published in 2006 under the title *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills*. The UK performs relatively poorly in international comparisons of workforce skills. Leitch recommended targets for improving skills at all levels from basic numeracy and literacy, to the skills associated with ‘level 4’ (degree level) qualifications. The report recommended a ‘demand-led’ approach to training, with

the 'demand' coming from individuals and employers. There is no attempt to identify the specific substantive content of the skills that will be required in future. This is partly because 'history tells us that no one can predict with any accuracy future occupational needs' (HM TREASURY, 2006, p. 13) and partly because of the aim of moving from a supply-driven to a demand-led approach. Although the report recognises 'it is possible to have skills without having qualifications' (HM TREASURY, 2006, p. 28), in practice the focus throughout is squarely on qualifications as a proxy for skills. The working assumption that skills = qualifications is problematic, though one rationale offered is that employers use qualifications in assessing candidates for employment, so that accredited skills are the ones that matter if the aim is to meet employer requirements.

The Leitch report also noted that a lack of so-called 'soft skills' is a particular problem for UK employers, as reported in the 2005 National Employer Skills Survey:

Employers in the survey felt that soft skills were lacking (particularly team working and customer handling skills, each of which were mentioned as lacking in one half of all workers lacking proficiency). Technical, practical or job-specific skills were seen to be lacking in over two fifths of employees with a skills gap. Other generic, soft skills such as oral communication, problem-solving and written communication skills were the next most commonly

reported skills gaps. A lack of literacy and numeracy skills were each present in one fifth of reported skill gaps. The Confederation of British Industry's (CBI) recent Employer Trends Survey found that employers place the highest priority for training on leadership and management skills. (HM TREASURY, 2006, p. 41)

This perceived lack of soft skills is a longstanding feature of the UK labour market. According to Payne, under the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) introduced in the 1980s

'skill' was detaching itself from particular occupations and moving far beyond its traditional association with the specific technical facilities of the skilled manual worker. Training for the young unemployed now encompassed a range of generic 'social and life skills' , 'communication skills' , 'reasoning skills', 'survival skills' and 'problem solving skills' . Moreover, in so far as these were aimed specifically at the cognitive, social and personal effectiveness of the trainee, they could not be distinguished from an attempt to construct a particular worker-subject replete with certain desirable values, attitudes, behaviours and dispositions. (PAYNE, 2000, p. 356)

Payne's insight supports Foucault's insistence that disciplinary power has been supplemented rather than supplanted by biopolitical power. The exercise of

biopolitical power at the collective (population/workforce) level has disciplinary effects at the level of the individual 'worker-subject'. This is particularly true at the 'lower' end of the labour market where training and skills, as the work of Gordon Lafer shows in the case of the United States. Lafer questions the direct value of job training in conditions of high unemployment and weak demand for labour and argues that the principal effects of supply-side interventions are disciplinary (LAFER, 2002, 2004; see also PECK, 2001). Others have made similar arguments for the UK (SUNLEY et al., 2006).

The Leitch report noted that economic inequalities between the regions and nations of the UK have persisted despite overall economic and employment growth and that these inequalities are higher than the European average (HM TREASURY, 2006, p. 35). According to Leitch, 'skills are a key driver of fairness, ensuring that everyone can share in the benefits of growth, reducing inequalities and helping ensure no group, region or area is left behind' (p. 35). Moreover, inter-regional inequality is partly explained by 'the different skills mixes of each region and country of the UK'. Regional skills mixes 'differ for a number of reasons, including the lower attainment of qualifications by young people in some areas and the fact that some of those that do gain higher qualifications in some regions move to the south of England, where many high skill jobs are currently to be found' (p. 35). However, Leitch also identified great complexity in the implementation of existing skills policy at regional

and local levels. This led to fragmented provision and a confusing picture for those seeking access to education and training after the age of 16 .

After the publication of the Leitch review, the government made significant changes to the governance of skills. In 2008 it established the 'employer-led' UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). The Commission was set up to advise government, assess national progress in the development of skills, and fund and monitor industry-specific skills councils (Sector Skills Councils). The strategic priorities for the Commission were to build 'a more strategic, agile and demand-led employment and skills system', to maximise 'individual opportunity for skills and sustainable employment', and to increase 'employer ambition, engagement and investment in skills'.<sup>4</sup>

In October 2009 the UKCES published its expert advice to government which it hoped would be the basis of a ten-year consensus on skills policy across the UK's four nations and across the political spectrum (UK COMMISSION FOR EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS, 2009). It proposed a simplification of the currently highly complex skills landscape in England. While the advice implies that there are regionally distinct skills needs and that the framework for skills provision should have regional and local components, the details of the simplified institutional

arrangements at national, regional and local levels were left as a matter for government decision.

The following month the government published a white paper on *Skills for growth: the national skills strategy*. (As skills policy is devolved, 'national' here refers to England, rather than the UK.) The Regional Development Agencies were to be central to the delivery of the national strategy. Each RDA would be required to produce a regional skills strategy as part of a new integrated regional strategy:

The regional strategies will be developed and agreed with local leaders in each region. The skills strategies will articulate employer demand and set out specific skills investment priorities for their region. The skills priorities in the regional strategies will inform Ministers' Annual Skills Investment Strategy and how the Skills Funding Agency will fund colleges and training institutions to ensure an appropriate supply of skills to meet the national, sectoral, regional and sub-regional priorities. (DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS INNOVATION AND SKILLS, 2009, p. 36-7)

RDAs were also instructed to draw up 'regional skills priorities statements' to shape immediate funding decisions in advance of the production of the full regional skills strategies. Then, in May 2010, six months after the publication of the Skills for

Growth white paper, a General Election saw the Labour Party defeated at the polls and the formation of a coalition government of the Conservatives led by David Cameron and the Liberal Democrats led by Nick Clegg.

The new Coalition Government wasted no time in moving to abolish regional government in England. According to the incoming Secretary of State, Eric Pickles,

We do not believe the arbitrary government regions to be a tier of administration that is efficient, effective or popular. Citizens across England identify with their county, their city, their town, their borough and their neighbourhood. We should recognise that the case for elected regional government was overwhelmingly rejected by the people in the 2004 North East Referendum. Unelected regional government equally lacks democratic legitimacy, and its continuing existence has created a democratic deficit.<sup>5</sup>

In October 2010 the government published a white paper on *Local Growth: Realising Every Place's Potential*, which argued that the target-driven approach of the previous government 'worked against the market'. Moreover,

it was also based on regions, an artificial representation of functional economies; for example, labour markets largely do not exist at a regional level, except in London. This therefore missed the opportunities that come



from local economic development activity focused on functional economical areas. (HM GOVERNMENT, 2010, p. 7)

However, despite the government's antipathy towards regions as a tier of unelected government, the white paper acknowledges the importance of sub-national differences in economic circumstances, and specifically identifies "the inherent skills mix or entrepreneurial tradition of the population" in each place as a matter of concern (HM GOVERNMENT, 2010, p. 7).

Although the eight regions of England that became a vehicle for so much New Labour policy-making have been consigned to history, the white paper views *city-regions*, defined as functional economic areas, as the appropriate basis for the promotion of economic development. Although the new government has been keen to present itself as adopting a wholly new approach, city-regions had already become an important scale of economic governance under the previous administration. As such areas are often defined in terms of labour market geography, they are, if anything, more fitted to the exercise of biopolitical power than their larger predecessors. In place of the Regional Development Agencies, the new government has encouraged the formation of new Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs): joint local authority-business bodies charged with promoting local economic development. They are often based on city-regions "whose

geography properly reflects the natural economic areas of England” (HM GOVERNMENT, 2010, p. 12). It remains to be seen whether LEPs, which are required to be self-financing, can succeed in promoting the ‘local growth’ that the white paper promises.

Shortly after the publication of *Local Growth* the new government also published a new national skills strategy (DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS INNOVATION AND SKILLS, 2010). While remaining committed the Leitch review’s aspiration to raise the skills base of the population to ‘world-class’ levels, the new strategy promises to

abolish the Leitch targets and the machinery of centralised control set up to meet them. Providers will be able to supply the type and volume of training that is needed in their local area, with increasing flexibility to respond to local needs and the demands for quality of learners and employers.

(DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS INNOVATION AND SKILLS, 2010, p. 13-4)

The new strategy highlights the role of LEPs, but states that they will have no power to direct the provision of skills in their areas. Rather, in a demand-led system it is for training providers to “engage with their local enterprise partnership to ensure alignment between the economic development priorities and the skills provision available locally” (DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS INNOVATION AND SKILLS,

2010, p. 54). The hoped for outcomes of the strategy include “reduced skill deficiencies at local, regional or sectoral level, because they are quickly identified and tackled, through the demand led skills system” (DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS INNOVATION AND SKILLS, 2010, p. 59). The implication, however, is that if skill deficiencies do not reduce then the fault will lie with educational providers (for being insufficiently responsive) or with learners (for being insufficiently demanding).

This kind of approach to skills provision seems to constitute a shift away from a biopolitical concern with the population towards a more disciplinary form of power focused on the individual. At the same time, though, the strategy touts the benefits of improved skills levels in resolutely biopolitical and collective terms:

Skills are an asset of our cultural and community life. They enable people to play a full part in society, making it more cohesive, more environmentally-friendly, more tolerant and more engaged. The benefits to social cohesion include reduced crime, greater civic engagement, better health and more socially tolerant attitudes towards minority groups. The process of learning also has a strong positive impact on mental health and well-being, helping people cope better with the stresses of daily life as well as social change.

(DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS INNOVATION AND SKILLS, 2010, p. 30-1)

## **Skills strategies, scalar practices and regional biopolitics**

The new government announced that it would immediately abandon the requirement to produce regional skills strategies and in due course abolish the RDAs. However, the regional skill priorities statements produced by the RDAs during 2010 provide an insight into the regional geography of skills requirements in England and at least the outlines of what the regional skill strategies would have offered.

The official identification of regional skills priorities, like other aspects of regional economic governance, involves a large element of performativity. By declaring certain desired outcomes to be priorities, regional agencies are not merely anticipating the future, but seeking to influence it, even to bring it about. Depending on the wider policy environment in which they are embedded, the establishment of priorities may affect flows of funds, induce organisational change, and incentivise behaviour. The knowledge that goes into the production of strategies and statements of priorities depends on research, statistical expertise, data gathering, forecasting, modelling and so on, as well as theoretical assumptions about the geography of the regional economy and labour market. As Barnes (2008) argues, markets and the economy do not exist independently of such theories and assumptions, but are

brought into existence through their performance (MACKENZIE, 2006). Elements of that performance and its multiscalar geographies can be unpacked by examining how the regional skills priorities statements exemplify Legg's scalar biopolitical practices: subjectification, information collection and territorialisation, geopolitical imaginations, state technologies and international comparisons.

### ***Subjectification***

In the case of the statement for north-east England, subjectification is particularly concerned with the promotion of 'active' subjects who will take responsibility for the development of their own skills. The statement says that individuals are responsible for 'active consumerism [of training] and clear articulation of current and future skills needs' and 'an active commitment to lifelong learning and flexibility in accessing learning and skills' (SKILLS NORTH EAST, 2010, p. 4). The East of England statement speaks of 'fostering aspiration' (EAST OF ENGLAND DEVELOPMENT AGENCY, 2010, p. 6) and 'helping individuals to development their employability and [...] tackle personal barriers' (p. 20). In the case of the statement for south-west England, the goal of raising individual aspirations is identified as the second of the three regional priorities. In particular,

the South West has significantly higher numbers of self-employed, part-time and temporary workers than other regions. These people, many of whom are women, need to be encouraged to raise their aspirations and qualification levels. (SOUTH WEST RDA, 2010, p. 4)

As in the statement for north-east England, there is also a strong emphasis on encouraging individuals to acquire higher level skills and then to stay in the region (SOUTH WEST RDA, 2010, p. 9). This reflects the longstanding problem of the out-migration of skilled labour from economically weaker regions. These documents thus form part of a wider discourse in which young, educated, skilled and entrepreneurial people are encouraged to identify with the region as somewhere that can offer them a successful future. By contrast in the affluent and high skill region of south-east England, the statement highlights the need to raise the skill level of the population in order to fill the skills gap that is likely to arise as a result of planned restrictions on the international migration of skilled labour into the UK (SOUTH EAST ENGLAND DEVELOPMENT AGENCY, 2010, p. 9&17).

### ***Information Collection and Territorialisation***

All the statements rely heavily on the extensive collection of data that is collated, aggregated and analyzed at the regional scale. Several of the statements also

highlight intra-regional variations in the skills levels and requirements of their populations. The statement for north-east England draws on a range of official data sources, including the Annual Population Survey and the Labour Force Survey, to set out in statistical terms the progress that has been made in developing the region's skills:

The qualifications profile of the North East improved markedly between 2000 and 2008. The proportion of the working age population with no qualifications fell by almost 8%, equivalent to c100,000 people. There was equally significant growth in the proportion qualified to Level 4+ (up 7%), Level 3 (up 5%) and Level 2 (up 4%). This performance has helped the qualification profile of the North East converge towards the national average. The proportion of the working age population with either Level 1 or no qualifications is now almost identical to the rest of the UK. (SKILLS NORTH EAST, 2010, p. 5)

At the same time, it is noted that

the North East demonstrates a persistent deficit in higher level skills. The region has a smaller proportion qualified to Level 4+ (5% fewer) and an equivalently larger proportion qualified to Levels 2 and 3. Urban / rural

differentiation exists in some rural areas one quarter of residents have no qualifications, largely due to barriers to access. (SKILLS NORTH EAST, 2010, p. 5)

The document then proceeds to anatomise the characteristics of the regional population in terms of skill, to identify the specific skills requirements of the region's principal economic sectors and to model future changes in demand for skills relating to likely shifts in the region's population, economic activity and industrial structure. A summary of sub-regional variations is set out in an Annex.

The statement for south-west England describes the evidence base for the analysis. A key source was research and analysis undertaken by SLIM, the 'skills and learning intelligence module' of the South West Regional Observatory. A 'research observatory' was established in each of the English regions to enhance the work of the regional agencies by providing evidence and undertaking research. SLIM's *South West Regional Employment and Skills Analysis 2010* runs to over 300 pages and includes 156 figures and 44 tables of data (SLIM, 2010). It provides a comprehensive statistical portrait of the region in relation to the skills and employment status of its population, broken down by social group, geographical area, economic activity and other variables. The section on skills compares the South-west with the other regions of England, highlighting the variation that exists between regions in the proportion



of the population that have attained qualifications at different levels. The SLIM report is in many ways a quintessential biopolitical document. It seeks to draw together knowledge of the population, apply it analytically, and provide the basis for policy formation involving the targeting of specific population groups.

### ***Geopolitical Imaginations***

Legg uses the idea of 'geopolitical imaginations' to refer to the 'ways in which data are processed and presented and the effect on political spaces of identification'. In the regional skills priorities statements a number of such imaginations are at work. Firstly, and most obviously, is the framing of the region as a space of identification. Although the statements for 2011-12 were published after the 2010 General Election, when it had become clear that the regional institutions would be abolished by the incoming Conservative-led Coalition Government, they necessarily retain the spatial focus on their respective regions. It is also apparent, though, that the new government's 'localism' agenda was already having an effect, with the planned 'Local Enterprise Partnerships' emerging as the basis of a new geographical framing of the skills landscape. Secondly, the statements use data to figure their respective regions in relation to discourses of economic competitiveness. The statement for the North-east refers to the need for the region 'to develop an internationally competitive skill base' (SKILLS NORTH EAST, 2010, p. 26). In the East of England

region, 'occupational and sector-specific skills must be world-class to enable the region's employers to be internationally competitive' (EAST OF ENGLAND DEVELOPMENT AGENCY, 2010, p. 5).

Thirdly, intra-regional differences are often highlighted. These are not regions where the emphasis is on a homogeneous economy or a singular cultural identity. Diversity in economic activity is valued either as an existing characteristic or one to be aspired to. At the same time, intra-regional disparities in the level of skills is a frequent concern, not least in otherwise prosperous regions such as the South-east:

Areas of deprivation exist throughout the South East. This is particularly apparent in coastal areas of north Kent, East Sussex and the Isle of Wight, as well as in parts of many urban areas such as Portsmouth, Slough and Milton Keynes. These are also significant in small, dispersed pockets, including rural areas. In these areas individuals often face multiple challenges including low skills, limited accessibility, housing and environmental challenges and poor health. (SOUTH EAST ENGLAND DEVELOPMENT AGENCY, 2010, p. 10)

Finally, most of the statements see the production of a highly-skilled regional population as a key policy goal. These aspirations are closely linked to discourses of economic success, regional vibrancy and orientation to the future and to the

attractiveness of the region to entrepreneurial and innovative in-migrants. While these goals are widely shared between regions, the specific mix of industries and substantive skills involved varies from place to place.

### ***State Technologies***

In Legg's account, state technologies refer to the means through which the state seeks to influence population patterns in relation to, among other things, productivity.

Under New Labour, national target-setting was one of the principal mechanisms for promoting such changes. Labour market policy since the 1980s has frequently been characterised as 'supply side', meaning that government intervention has been directed towards improving the quantity, quality, flexibility of the supply of labour (and placing downwards pressure on its price, that is on wages). However, there is evidence in some of the regional skills priorities statements of a shift in emphasis towards promoting the demand for labour. The North-east's statement notes that

A higher proportion of the North East workforce is qualified to Level 4 [degree level] than the occupational structure requires. Consequently, the lack of opportunity in the region discourages young people from progressing to higher level skills, existing skills are under-utilised and it is difficult to attract highly skilled individuals to the region. Achieving economic growth will

require a 'push-pull' approach, promoting a combination of both rising qualifications and stimulating demand for higher level skills. (SKILLS NORTH EAST, 2010, p. 8)

Demand for higher level skills might be stimulated 'by encouraging firms to adopt new technologies and innovative practices and employ leadership and management techniques to drive up productivity' (SKILLS NORTH EAST, 2010, p. 8).

The supply of skills is promoted through a complex system of formal qualifications, apprenticeships, attainment frameworks, employer training schemes, funding programmes and public, private and voluntary sector organisations. Although the formal skills frameworks are national in scope, one of the purposes of the region skills priorities statements is to allow funding priorities to be shaped to specific regional and sub-regional needs. Indeed the statements and related strategy documents are themselves an example of state technologies. The identification of priorities involves some quite detailed specification of regional requirements by industrial sector and skill level. For example, in the North-west there is a need for technician level skills in growth sectors, but while the automotive sector 'may wish to focus on Level 2 and 3 skills', the nuclear sector requires skills at Level 3 and above and 'low carbon renewable will need technical high level skills including

science graduates' (NORTH WEST REGIONAL SKILLS STRATEGY PARTNERSHIP, 2010, p. 22-3).

### ***International Comparisons***

In skills policy as in much else, the English regional agencies that were developed under New Labour were relatively limited in scope and powers by international (particularly European standards). The importance of regionalisation to the project of European integration has previously been noted. The elected status of the Welsh and Scottish governments confers a legitimacy on them in the eyes of European institutions and networks that was lacking in the English regions. For example, in the skills domain Wales and Scotland are members of the European Association of Regional and Local Authorities for Lifelong Learning. In addition, for all the Leitch review's emphasis on a demand-led approach and the need to avoid top-down centrally-determined provision, the overarching framework of skills policy under New Labour was avowedly national, reinforcing the fact that the Regional Development Agencies were principally delivery vehicles for central government policy.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined how populations are constituted and governed geographically. It has argued, following Foucault, that the problem of population is a modern problem that came into being at the end of the eighteenth century giving rise to biopolitical power as a new form of power in addition to sovereign and disciplinary power. Biopolitics deals with the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of populations as objects of political concern. Recent writings on biopolitics have often focused on security and the movement of people, reflecting wider political anxieties about global terrorism and immigration from poorer parts of the world to wealthier ones. In this paper the focus has been on a more mundane but still significant aspect of biopolitics – the economic potential and productivity of the workforce. The geographically uneven patterning of the skills and economic attributes of the population have been a focus of considerable attention because of their implications for spatial disparities in living standards, life chances, the functioning of the welfare state and levels of public expenditure. Using Stephen Legg's elaboration of a Foucauldian population geography, the paper examined how regional biopolitics arises where population attributes such as skills come to be configured at the sub-national regional level through practices of subjectification, territorialisation, geopolitical imagination and international comparison via specific state technologies.

The UK Government's drive for localism is at any early stage and its full effects will not be known for some time. Nevertheless, it is evident that the geographies of biopolitics are being reshaped. In England, a formal regional tier of government has been abolished and its associated biopolitical practices are being re-scaled. A new emphasis on the municipal and metropolitan scales (city-regions) is evident, though it appears that these spaces will be governmentalised to a much lesser extent than their predecessors. Although the constitutional changes of the late 1990s have led to a considerable devolution of power to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, within England government remained highly centralised. Central government retained the power to reconfigure the pattern of sub-national government more or less at will.

However the abolition of regional government does not mean the end of regional biopolitics. The government of social and economic life has an irreducible geographical dimension. Spatial disparities in population change, migration flows, demographic structure, health and education as well as skills and productivity, all pose serious policy and political challenges. While localism and marketisation may give the appearance of reduced state control in the short term, their consequences in the longer term are unpredictable and liable to require coordinated policy responses.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internationalregions.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.freref.eu/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.earlall.eu/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ukces.org.uk/about-ukces/about-the-uk-commission/stategic-priorities/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.communities.gov.uk/statements/newsroom/regionalgovernment>